

The Dodd Dinners

There was no longer any dispute over the fact that Connecticut Sen. Thomas J. Dodd has handsomely supplemented his \$30,000-a-year salary with funds from testimonial dinners. But there was a growing controversy over the ethics of the practice.

The silver-thatched senator's extracurricular financing first came under criticism last month with the disclosure by columnists Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson that Dodd had netted \$54,455.58 from a 1961 dinner in Hartford. Last week, the controversy flared when Dodd Day dinners came to light: a \$47,000 gathering in 1963, a \$10,000 evening in 1964 and a 1965 \$100-a-plate dinner that produced \$100,000.

When the first criticisms were aired, Dodd told NEWSWEEK that the proceeds of the 1961 dinner were to pay off old campaign debts. Now his intimates say that he treated all the money from all the dinners not only as a fund to pay the old debts but as personal gifts to defray his own day-to-day living expenses. This new explanation presumably exempts him from income tax on the money. (Campaign contributions used for personal expenses are taxable, but personal gifts are not.) But despite his twelve years of honorable service in both houses of Congress, Dodd may be vulnerable in the twilight field of political ethics. Though there is no law against accepting such large gifts of money—so long as no quid pro quo collusion is proved—to many Americans, Dodd's dough may seem too much from too many for too little reason.

Indeed, a series of disclaimers from national figures who helped Dodd raise the money was already under way. Lyndon Baines Johnson, who as Vice Presi-

dent spoke at the 1961 dinner, told reporters at a weekend news conference that he had "no information about any dinners held for anyone to obtain funds for personal use." He added: "None that I ever attended . . . were being held for that purpose." Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who spoke at last year's testimonial dinner, "assumed" that the affair was only a routine campaign fundraiser and so did Democratic National Chairman John Bailey, who was one of the principal guests. And another Democratic state leader declares unequivocally that "everyone I know who went to those dinners was under the impression that the money was going for campaign purposes."

But Dodd still had his supporters. Back in Connecticut, New Haven Democratic town chairman Arthur Barbieri said last week that the money from the 1965 dinner was "not designated for campaign purposes. It was turned over to the senator to be used at his personal discretion." Another friend argued in his defense that Dodd, after all, "gave up a \$60,000-a-year law practice to come to Washington." The senator also had some supporters, albeit anonymous ones, on Capitol Hill. Political slush funds, said one fellow senator, "are part of the American way of life." "If you are going to forbid all outside income," said another colleague, "you penalize the legislators who don't have independent means. You penalize the Humphreys in favor of the Kennedys."

Most pols, however, were keeping a discreet and watchful silence. After a \$100-a-plate dinner last week raised some \$30,000 for House Foreign Affairs chairman Thomas Morgan of Pennsylvania (attendance was stimulated by the brief appearance of President Johnson), the congressman's office avoided saying just how the proceeds would be spent. "It hasn't been decided yet," said a wary spokesman.

Checkers: While the immediate flap over the Dodd funds was begun by columnists Pearson and Anderson (NEWSWEEK, April 11), in principle the controversy goes back much further. Richard Nixon was embroiled in a somewhat similar rhubarb in 1952 when disclosure of an \$18,000 slush fund almost robbed him of the GOP Vice Presidential nomination, which he managed to salvage with his famed "Checkers" speech. And former Gov. William Stratton of Illinois was indicted—and last year acquitted—on charges of evading \$40,676 in taxes on unreported slush-fund income.

As the controversy has bubbled up, Dodd has remained discreetly silent. He has asked the new Senate Ethics Committee to investigate the matter, along with other conflict-of-interest charges that Pearson and Anderson lodged

against him in a series of columns that Dodd charges are based on documents stolen from his personal files.

At the weekend, while the Ethics Committee was temporizing on the case, several members were quick to declare that they themselves had never participated in this slush-fund "part of the American way of life." More significantly, Delaware's feisty Sen. John Williams—the man who built the Senate fire under Bobby Baker—called for a basic investigation of Dodd's claim that the slush-fund money was tax free. Indeed, Williams broke hoary Senatorial custom by referring publicly to a specific charge



Dodd (right) and Bailey in 1961

against a particular senator. Nonetheless, few could disagree with the point he made: "If there is anything here," Williams said, "it should be laid out before the Senate and the country."